

NRCS Helps Agriculture Return to The Hermitage



John Leach with belted galloways with Hermitage in the background



Newly renovated cabins with pasture in foreground.

Most people think of The Hermitage as the home of Andrew Jackson, but for Jackson it was a thriving farm. After Jackson's death it went through a period of decline, but today, more than 200 years later, agriculture is returning to The Hermitage, with some assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

A private contractor working on the property suggested to farm manager John Leach that he contact Gregg Brann, NRCS Grazing Specialist for assistance on grazing practices and fencing placement. This was the beginning of a mutually beneficial partnership.

It was challenging to try to get the maximum conservation benefit on the farm while maintaining the integrity of the historical property. NRCS employees have to be cognizant of the cultural resources during the planning and installation of conservation practices. NRCS provided several alternatives to apply conservation practices that will improve the farm and protect the natural resources and yet fit into the historic era of the farm, such as stream crossings made to look like cobbles and building a stone wall around the watering tanks.

Mr. Leach applied for assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to install conservation practices including field borders, fencing for rotational grazing and exclusion fencing, watering facilities and alternative watering sources, heavy use areas, and prescribed grazing. Then the Tennessee Department of Agriculture provided additional funding bringing the total cost-share to 90%.

Planning for wildlife was a major concern for The Hermitage. The EQIP contract will allow for more than 6,000 feet of Native Warm Season Grasses to be planted in field borders which will help the declining bob white quail, provide brood habitat and nesting cover for other ground nesting birds. Wild turkey and deer also benefit from this practice. The field borders also filter contaminants from agricultural runoff thus improving water quality.

Jenny Adkins, NRCS Water Quality Specialist provided assistance on protecting and improving the water quality of the two major springs that begin on The Hermitage. Excluding livestock from the springs, installing field borders and prescribed grazing will help to keep these springs clean.

Through the NRCS partnership with The Hermitage, NRCS has used their facilities for training purposes. The Hermitage is an ideal location for training because it has cultural resources, springs and creeks, row crops, cattle, agri-tourism, and urban encroachment. It is also the site of the 2005 Central Basin RC&D Envirothon.

NRCS District Conservationist Carolyn Dillard is working with them on agri-tourism since their only income is grants and admission fees. Wetlands, wildlife practices and viewing trails, and interpretive displays will increase tourist interest and educate an urban public on the value of agricultural practices.